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American Sign Language Phonology

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In language, phonology is the study of the smallest part of the language that conveys meaning. In spoken languages, like English, a phoneme is a unit of sound that conveys meaning.

For example, if you change the “a” in “sad” to “o,” you would create “sod,” which has a completely different meaning.

In ASL, the smallest parts of the language, the phonemes, are handshape, movement, palm orientation, location, and facial expression. If you change any of these parameters of a sign, then you have changed the meaning of the sign.

For example, if you change the movement of the sign CHAIR to only one movement instead of two, you have just created the sign SIT.

The Five Sign Parameters

Just like how we see English words as the arrangement of letters, there are five basic sign language elements that make up each sign. If any of these parameters are changed when creating a sign, the meaning of the sign can change.

The first four elements are:

- **Handshape** – This is the shape of your hand that is used to create the sign.
- **Movement** – This is the movement of the handshape that makes the sign.
- **Palm orientation** – This is the orientation of your palm when making the sign.
- **Location** – This is the location of the sign on or in front of your body.

There is also a fifth element that has recently been included with this list:

- **Non-manual Markers** – This is the various facial expressions or body movements that are used to create meaning.

American Sign Language is a very expressive language, and understanding these elements will give you a better understanding of how signs are made and what makes them different.

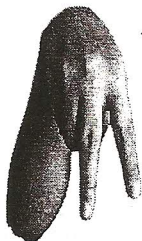
Parameter #1: Handshape

All signs are formed using a specific handshape. If you change the handshape of a sign, you can change the meaning of the sign. For example, if you change the handshape of the sign SCIENCE to a B-handshape, you would be signing the initialized sign BIOLOGY. So, it is important to know how to accurately form the handshape(s) of each sign.

Below are some of the common handshapes used in American Sign Language:



V Handshape



Inverted V



Bent V



Closed Hand



S Handshape



1 Handshape



5 Handshape

Parameter #2: Movement

The movement of a sign is the action that is used to create the sign. The movement can be in a circle, up and down, forward or backward, etc. If you change the movement of a sign, you can change the meaning of a sign.

For example, for the sign CHAIR, you move your dominant hand down twice and for the sign SIT, you move your dominant hand down once. A simple change of movement changes the meaning of that sign.

You will also notice that movements of some sequential signs have fused together over time. For example, the phrase "GOOD MORNING" is signed using one movement instead of two separate movements for each sign--your dominant hand doesn't stop moving until after MORNING.

Your Dominant Hand

You have a dominant and non-dominant hand. If you are right-handed, your right hand is your dominant hand. If you are left-handed, your left hand is your dominant hand.

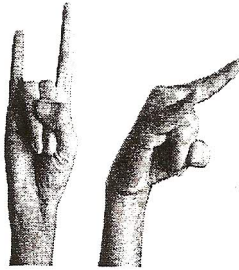
If you are ambidextrous, choose one hand to use as your dominant hand, and stick with it. However, if possible, I would recommend choosing your right hand as your dominant hand because most ASL dictionaries are illustrated this way.

There are three types of signs when it comes to what hand you will use:

1. **One-handed signs:** Use only your dominant hand.
2. **Two-handed signs where both hands move:** Move both your dominant and non-dominant hand. These signs normally use the same handshape and movement for both hands.



Claw Hand



Horns



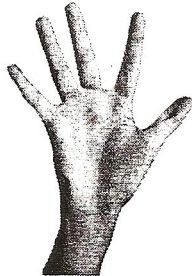
Flat Hand



Curved Hand



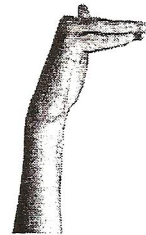
Cocked Index



Open Hand



1-Hand/Index



Bent Hand

ABCOS15

The handshapes "ABCOS15" are the handshapes that are formed by your non-dominant hand while signing. You will notice that for two-handed signs where only one hand moves (a non-symmetrical sign), your non-dominant will most likely be using one of these handshapes. These are handshapes your non-dominant hand uses as a stationary base for your moving dominant hand.



A Handshape



B Handshape



C Handshape



O Handshape

3. **Two-handed signs where one hand moves:** Move your dominant hand and keep your non-dominant hand stationary.



One-handed sign



Two-handed sign with both hands moving



Two-handed sign with one hand moving

More often than not, your non-dominant hand will never move unless your dominant hand is moving the same way. This is very important when you move into more complex signing. You don't want to get confused!

Parameter #3: Palm Orientation

The palm orientation of a sign refers to the position of the palms of your hands and the direction they are facing. If you change the palm orientation of a sign, you can change the meaning of the sign.

For example, the sign MY is made by placing your palm on your chest and the sign YOUR is made by facing your palm toward the other person. A simple change in palm orientation changes the meaning of that sign.

It is also important to know how to refer to the palm orientation of a sign:



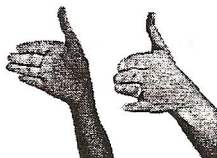
Forward – Palm is facing away from your body



Inward – Palm is facing toward your body



Horizontal – Palm is parallel to the floor



Palm toward palm – Palms are facing each other



Palm to palm – Palms are applied to each other

Parameter #4: Location

The location of a sign is where you place and form the sign in your signing area. If you change the location of a sign, you can change the meaning of a sign.

Some examples of locations include:

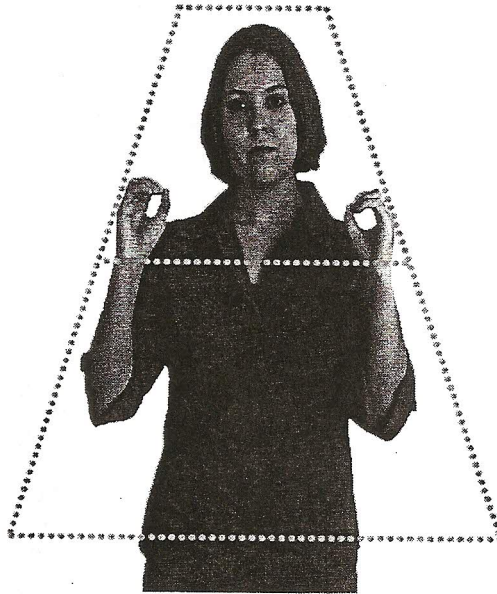
- In front of your body,
- Your head,
- Your face (forehead, eyes, temples, ear, nose, cheek, mouth, or chin),
- Your neck,
- Your shoulder, chest, or stomach,
- Your arm or elbow,
- Your waist,
- Your wrist, and
- Your non-dominant hand. In this case, your non-dominant hand will most likely use one of the ABCOS15 handshapes.

For example, the sign MOTHER is formed by tapping the thumb of your open-five hand on your chin, and the sign FATHER is formed by tapping the thumb of your open-five hand on your forehead. This simple change in location changes the meaning of the sign.

Signing Area

Your signing area is in the shape of a pyramid starting from the top of your head, down past your shoulders, and ending in a horizontal line at your waist. Unless you are signing a formal speech for a large audience, your signs shouldn't move outside of this area.

The space in the center of the chest is called the sightline. The sightline is where you would focus your eyes on a signer. This enables you to use your peripheral vision to see the signer's hands and facial expressions at the same time. Make sure to try to wear solid colored clothing (without designs) when signing—it is easier on the eyes.



Signing Area

Parameter #5: Non-Manual Markers (NMM)

Non-Manual Markers are very important in American Sign Language. They consist of the various facial expressions and body movements that are added to signs to create meaning. Non-manual markers can be facial expressions, head shakes, head nods, head tilts, shoulder shrugs, etc.

And not only do non-manual markers have a very important role in ASL grammar, but if you do not use any non-manual markers or facial expressions, your audience may not understand what you are signing, or worse, they may get bored very quickly. In English, this would be like speaking in a monotone voice.

Facial Expressions

Facial expressions are the non-manual markers that refer only to the expressions on your face. The meaning of your sign can be affected by the type of facial expression you use while signing it.

For example, if you use an exaggerated facial expression while signing the word HAPPY, then you are signing "very happy." This also works to change FUNNY into "very funny." In ASL, you will notice that less signs are used with more facial expression to get the same message across in a more clear and visual way. For example, you really would never sign, "VERY HAPPY." The VERY can come across in your facial expression so you would only have to sign HAPPY.

Facial expressions can also determine what type of question you are asking. If you raise your eyebrows while asking a question, you are asking a yes or no question. If you lower your eyebrows while asking a question, you are asking a question that requires more than a yes or no answer (generally a "wh" word question).



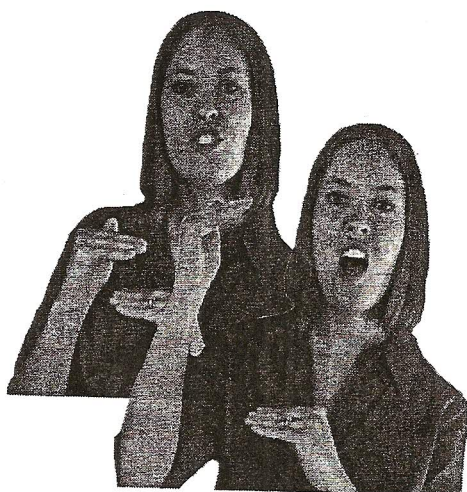
Yes/No Question



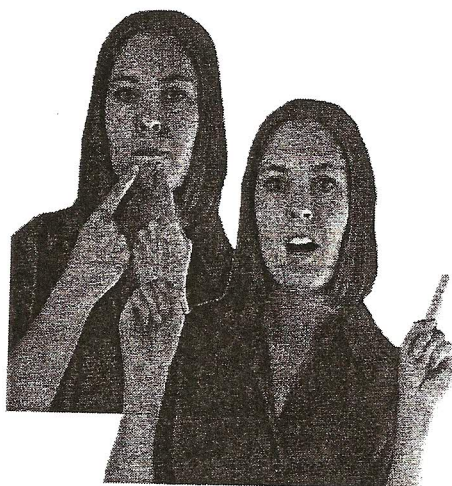
"Wh" Word Question

Facial expressions also add clarity to what you mean when you are signing. Some signs even require a certain facial expression in order to sign them. For example, the only difference between the signs LATE and NOT-YET is the facial expression. NOT-YET is signed with your tongue hanging out slightly over your bottom teeth. Without this facial expression, the meaning of the sign changes.

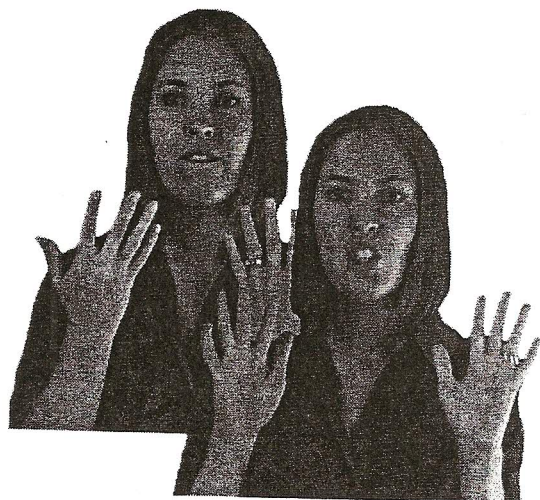
And there are over 100 mouth movements in ASL that are used to convey an adverb, adjective, or another more descriptive meaning when signing certain ASL words. Here are some examples:



"cha"



"pah"



"fsh"

English	ASL
I drank a large cup of soda.	__ "cha" I FINISH DRINK LARGE SODA
I finally finished my term paper!	_____t __ "pah" TERM PAPER, I FINALLY FINISH
I finished washing the car.	__ "fsh" I FINISH WASH-CAR
The chocolate melted all over the place.	__ "thh" CHOCOLATE MELT
I broke the phone.	__ "bro" I BROKE PHONE
I finished very recently.	_____ "cs" I RECENT FINISH
She doesn't pay attention when she drives.	__ "th" SHE DRIVE
Yesterday, I was just walking along like normal.	__ "mm" YESTERDAY I WALK
I saw a huge crowd of people.	"cheeks _____puffed" I SEE PEOPLE HORDES-OF
She is very thin.	"lips __pursed" SHE THIN
She struggled a lot with math.	_____t __ "sta-sta-sta" MATH, SHE STRUGGLE++

Body Language/Role Shifting

Body language is also one of the many non-manual markers. You would use body language for things like role shifting.